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New York

President:	Ms. Løj	(Denmark)
Members:	Argentina	Mr. García Moritán
	China	Mr. Li Junhua
	Congo	Mr. Ikouebe
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Ghana	Mr. Christian
	Greece	Mrs. Papadopoulou
	Japan	Mr. Oshima
	Peru	Mr. Pereyra Plasencia
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Nasser
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Slovakia	Mr. Mlynár
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Bye
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Manongi
	United States of America	Mr. Bolton

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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06-39820 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Gambari: The past month has seen heightened tension and increasing violence, both among Palestinians and in the conflict between them and Israel. That violence has taken a particularly severe toll on Palestinian civilians in Gaza. There was also a significant outbreak of violence across the Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel. Despite continuing violence, however, a few positive steps have been taken to deescalate what remains a very volatile situation overall. All acts of violence, especially those that either endanger or specifically target civilians, must cease, and negotiations towards a comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must not be further delayed.

Let me now proceed to discuss key political developments. On 10 June, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Abbas called a referendum, to be held on 26 July, on the covenant for national reconciliation agreed upon by Palestinian prisoners. President Abbas has indicated that his decree does not preclude the possibility of consensus being reached at any time before the date of the referendum, in which case the referendum would not necessarily proceed. During earlier discussions, most Palestinian factions other than Hamas and Islamic Jihad had expressed support for the prisoners' document. The Palestinian Authority Government indicated its concern about aspects of the document, disputed the legality and even the desirability of a referendum and called for a dialogue without deadlines. In recent days, however, progress has been reported on narrowing differences on the issues in dispute.

In the past week or so, the security situation in the streets calmed somewhat following consultations between President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh. Those consultations concluded with an announcement that the special force recently created by the Minister of the Interior should be absorbed into the payroll of the Palestinian Authority after its members have received proper police training. The force has not yet been fully withdrawn from the streets in Gaza, but it is less visible than before. We continue to encourage all Palestinian parties to leave no stone unturned in efforts to ensure the harmonious and coherent operation of security forces and to achieve consensus on a political programme that responds to the Palestinian people's desire for a peacefully negotiated two-State solution.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert has met with the leaders of Egypt, Jordan and several European countries over the past month. The Prime Minister has reiterated his desire to meet with President Abbas in the coming period, and, indeed, it appears they may have an opportunity to do so tomorrow, in Petra. However, he has also stressed that the Palestinian Authority Government must meet the Quartet's three principles, and that there is a finite period of time for the pursuit of negotiations. Prime Minister Olmert indicated his determination to proceed with the implementation of his "realignment" plan, details of which have not yet been made public. We look forward to Prime Minister Olmert's meeting with President Abbas and consider it as an important step towards resuming negotiations, which remains, in our view, the best way to promote peace.

With regard to security and violence, I would like to say that, in the reporting period, at least 64 Palestinians have been killed, including at least 11 children, and at least 328 Palestinians have been injured, including, again, many children. Forty-nine of those killed and 259 of those injured were the victims of Israeli-Palestinian violence. The rest were casualties of intra-Palestinian violence. One Israeli was killed and 18 were injured in Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Israel stepped up its policy of targeted killings of militants and shelling of areas in Gaza, from which rockets continue to be fired at Israeli territory. On 29 May, for the first time since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, Israeli ground troops entered the Gaza Strip, killing five Palestinians. On 8 June, an Israeli air strike in Gaza killed the commander of the Popular Resistance Committees, Jamal Abu Samhadana, together with four other alleged militants. On 13 June, two consecutive Israeli missile strikes were fired on a car allegedly transporting rockets to be fired at Israel, resulting in the deaths of three Islamic Jihad operatives, but also killing eight bystanders, in a crowded street in Gaza. The Secretary-General is particularly disturbed that, despite his prior expressions of concern, this pattern was repeated only yesterday, when three children were killed and a number of bystanders injured during another attempted targeted killing by Israel, also in a crowded neighbourhood in Gaza. We would like to once again underscore the need for Israel to cease targeted killings, which continue to claim civilian lives. It is the view of the Secretary-General that Israeli actions should be proportionate and in accordance with international humanitarian law.

On 9 June, an explosion on a beach in Gaza, at the time of an Israeli operation involving the firing of sea- and land-based weapons in the immediate area, killed seven civilians, all members of the same family. The Palestinian Authority held Israel responsible for the killings. An Israel Defense Forces (IDF) investigation subsequently concluded that Israeli military fire was not responsible for the deaths. However, a prominent human rights organization, Human Rights Watch, has disputed this. The Israeli investigation is continuing, in order to ascertain the cause of the explosion.

During the reporting period, the United Nations recorded 176 rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza towards Israeli territory. Some of these hit Israeli towns and cities, injuring five civilians and damaging private property and Government buildings, including a school. For the first time in well over a year, Hamas claimed responsibility for rockets launched at Israel. Hamas appears not to have continued these operations in recent days, and there have been statements indicating preparedness to resume the ceasefire. However, other militants continue to fire rockets at Israel on a daily basis. The Secretary-General has repeatedly called on the Palestinian Authority to heed the Quartet's call and meet its road map obligations to act decisively against terrorism, including acting to end indiscriminate rocket attacks that endanger Israeli civilian lives.

Clashes between militants loyal to Hamas and to Fatah led to the killing of local leaders and claimed the lives of many bystanders, including women and children. A number of violent protests also took place in Gaza and the West Bank, involving rival factions and civil servants who are angry at not receiving their salary payments. The Preventive Security headquarters in Gaza and the offices of the parliament and of the Council of Ministers in Ramallah were ransacked. Tensions eased somewhat following last week's developments.

I turn now to the fiscal and humanitarian situation. The Palestinian Authority's fiscal crisis has not abated. According to the International Monetary Fund, Palestinian Authority revenues in April amounted to a mere $35 million — one sixth of its monthly requirement. The continued non-transfer of Palestinian value added tax (VAT) and customs revenues collected by Israel remained the major impediment to fiscal stability. There have, however, been reports of large amounts of cash being brought into Gaza by Palestinian Authority officials and Hamas members.

In June, the Palestinian Authority made one salary payment to 10,000 of its lowest-paid workers through its treasury account. In addition, a further 90,000 employees each received on Monday, 19 June, about $300 in advances from the Palestinian Authority, using cash brought by officials and disbursed through local post offices. The remaining staff -approximately 40,000 people — have received no salary payments since February.

The delivery of some Palestinian Authority services has been interrupted. The Ministry of Social Affairs was unable to make cash payments to 47,000 people facing particular hardship. The main Gaza hospital was forced to halve the number of surgeries for three weeks owing to shortages of essential medicines. Normal surgeries have now resumed following intervention by the humanitarian organization CARE. The Government of Israel's plan to spend $11 million of Palestinian VAT and customs revenues on medicines for the Palestinian Authority has not been realized.

The economy is also experiencing decline. Palestinian gross domestic product fell by 7 per cent in the first quarter of 2006. Gaza is being hit harder than the West Bank by the current crisis. Almost 40 per cent of those employed in Gaza work for the Palestinian Authority. Unemployment in Gaza has also risen by six percentage points, to 34 per cent, in the first quarter of the year, prompted partly by a total moratorium on Gaza workers crossing into Israel. There are many reports of people selling possessions or going without food staples, such as meat, in order to subsist.

Unless arrested, continued economic decline, as forecast by the World Bank, combined with a degradation of public services, will have significant humanitarian impact and may also have longer-term consequences on prospects for peace and security. As long as the Palestinian Authority is unable fully to cover institutional costs, services will deteriorate, and many Palestinian Authority staff may be forced to find alternative sources of income if the fiscal crisis continues. The departure of qualified staff would result in immediate and long-term damage to the administration and delivery of services.

The Secretary-General is pleased, however, that the Quartet endorsed, on 17 June, a temporary international mechanism developed by the European Union to facilitate needs-based assistance directly to the Palestinian people, including essential equipment, supplies and support for health services; support for the uninterrupted supply of fuel and utilities; and allowances to poor Palestinians. For his part, the Secretary-General looks to donors, to other international organizations and to Israel — bearing in mind its responsibilities — to support the mechanism, so that it can become operational quickly and effectively.

With regard to movement and access, I would like to observe that, owing to increasingly strict Israeli security measures, United Nations national staff have not been able to pass through the Erez crossing to and from Gaza since February, while new measures are increasingly impeding the movement of international staff as well. Movement of United Nations personnel, particularly of national staff, has also been more difficult this year between Jerusalem, where most United Nations organizations have their headquarters, and the rest of the West Bank, where aid is needed. The United Nations continues to raise those concerns with the Israeli authorities, with little sign of improvement to date.

The movement of humanitarian and commercial goods to the Gaza Strip has improved somewhat since the end of May, with export figures rising to 21 truckloads per day after 22 May. Import figures for May indicate that, on average, about 250 truckloads per day are shipped to the Gaza Strip, allowing for the replenishment of basic food stocks that were near depletion. We hope that that trend will continue. Even given the improvement, however, organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the World Food Programme still face significant cost increases of approximately $120,000 per month as a result of long delays in returning empty containers from the Gaza Strip to the Ashdod port.

I turn now to settlements and the barrier. Israeli settlement activities continue, despite the road map and recent Quartet expressions of concern. According to a report by the Israeli non-governmental organization Peace Now, approximately 3,000 units are currently under construction in the West Bank, while construction of a police station in the E1 area between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim is continuing.

Barrier construction is also continuing, despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. On 23 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice approved the route of the section of the barrier in Jerusalem that passes between Ma'ale Adumim and the village of El-Azariyeh. On 15 June, the Israeli High Court ordered the dismantling of five kilometres of the barrier east of the settlement of Tzofin. According to the Court, during earlier hearings the State concealed the fact that the existing route was determined partly by a master plan for expanding the settlement, and not solely by security considerations. The Minister of Defence has reportedly ordered a review of the route of the barrier so as to reduce its impact on Palestinian daily life.

There have been several worrying developments in Lebanon. On 26 May, a senior member of Islamic Jihad and his brother were killed in an explosion in the southern city of Sidon. The Lebanese Government alleges that Israel was responsible for that explosion; Israel has denied it.

Two days later, in the morning of 28 May, rockets were launched from southern Lebanon by unidentified

armed elements against an IDF position 8 kilometres south of the Blue Line, wounding an Israeli soldier. Israeli jets responded by bombing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) positions in the Bekaa valley and in Na'ameh, south of Beirut, reportedly killing one PFLP-GC member and wounding several others.

The same afternoon, unidentified sniper fire from the Lebanese side of the Line wounded one Israeli soldier. Israel responded with air strikes against Hizbollah positions across southern Lebanon, killing one Hizbollah member and wounding two Lebanese civilians. Hizbollah responded with rocket, missile, mortar and small-arms fire.

Senior United Nations representatives on the ground intervened with the parties and worked in unison to bring about a ceasefire. The Secretary-General called for maximum restraint, while commending the Governments of both Israel and Lebanon for avoiding a further escalation. The situation along the Blue Line has remained calm since the 28 May incidents.

That sudden deterioration underscores that it is critically important that the Government of Lebanon exert all efforts to expand its effective authority over all of its territory and control the use of force, in order to prevent violations of the Blue Line.

There have been 19 Israeli air violations of the Blue Line — not counting the seven that occurred on 28 May during the exchange of fire — some deep into Lebanese territory. The Israeli authorities should halt such air violations and respect the Blue Line.

On 1 June, the commission charged with developing proposals for reform of the electoral law submitted its recommendations to Prime Minister Siniora. That is a first step towards electoral reform, which is a main priority of the Government of Lebanon. The Department of Political Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme continue their support for that important electoral reform process.

The eighth round of the Lebanese national dialogue convened on 8 June. Discussions continued on a national defence strategy for Lebanon, with new proposals being brought to the table for further consideration. Lebanese leaders also discussed measures to reduce the level of political tension in the country following the demonstrations in Beirut on 1 and 2 June. We commend Lebanon's leaders for that initiative, which again illustrates the benefits of a dialogue to address issues of national concern.

I have reported in detail the serious deterioration on the ground that we have seen this past month in the Middle East. The United Nations is particularly disturbed at the killing of so many Palestinian civilians in Gaza. I reiterate the Secretary-General's repeated calls for respect for international humanitarian law so that civilians are neither targeted nor put at grave and foreseeable risk.

Restraint on the part of everyone is all the more important given the faint rays of hope that we have begun to see in recent days. The intra-Palestinian agreement on integrating the special forces into the Palestinian Authority payroll, the efforts to narrow differences in the Palestinian national dialogue and the decisions of the parties not to escalate to levels from which it might be difficult to pull back are worthy of note — although this assessment must be tempered with an awareness that violence continues.

The positive signal sent by the Quartet's decision of last weekend to channel assistance to the Palestinian people — which we hope will be rapidly supported and implemented by all concerned — gives added weight to domestic Palestinian voices calling for restraint and dialogue. We hope that those voices will be heard and heeded in the interest of peace, security and well-being for the people of the region.

Finally, it is vital that Israeli and Palestinian leaders continue their efforts to pave the way for meaningful negotiations. In that respect, we take heart from the fact that opinion polls continue to underscore the desire of both peoples for a two-State solution and for that goal to be achieved peacefully and through negotiations. The United Nations will continue to work with its partners towards that goal. There is no alternative.

The President: I thank Mr. Gambari for his briefing.

The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.